

Sexist, Racist Attitudes Entrenched in Society Erode Women's Dignity, Humanity and Safety

By Terry O'Neill, NOW President

March 14, 2013

Reporters sometimes ask me to compare the status of women in the United States with countries and cultures where oppression is officially sanctioned and much more blatant. The implication is that women in this country have it pretty good, and feminists should just back off. My response is to patiently list the numerous legislative struggles and horrific events that have taken place in the U.S. in recent months.

Just two weeks ago we finally succeeded in expanding the Violence Against Women Act to include protections for immigrant women, the LGBT community and Native American women — but not without a long and frustrating battle. For some members of Congress, these women were not considered worthy of protection; somehow they weren't "real" victims. Or were they not "real" women?

I could also point to the Steubenville, Ohio, rape case, where an unconscious young woman was dragged from place to place while young men raped and ridiculed her. Many in the town chose not to rally around the assaulted woman (despite photographic and video evidence of the crimes) but to close ranks around the accused football players and the bystanders who egged them on.

Last week, political analyst Zerlina Maxwell went on the "Hannity" show on Fox News and suggested that the first step in preventing sexual assault should be telling men not to rape women. Maxwell, who is African American and a rape survivor, was rewarded for her courage and common sense with sexist, racist, violent threats.

Sadly, the degradation of women and girls is ubiquitous in our society. The term "rape culture" is used to describe the casual debasement we all experience and witness every day. In fact, it has become such a part of our lives that it is often invisible. The Super Bowl, for example, has become an annual parade of sexist commercials that seem to take pride in their use of outdated stereotypes and women as objects.

Sadly, the Academy Awards appear to be shaping up to be another yearly procession of sexist and racist material, half-heartedly gussied up with a wink and a nod. This year's host, Seth MacFarlane, used a stunt that was either pretty clever or majorly weak (depending on whom you talk to), designed to allow him to say offensive things without catching too much heat. The Onion tried a similar ploy, but more on that in a minute.

MacFarlane — during one of the most watched telecasts of the year, mind you — sang about high-profile women actors who have shown their breasts in mainstream films, a song charmingly called “We Saw Your Boobs.” Numerous excellent pieces have been written about this musical number, pointing out that many of the scenes involving these women’s breasts were [depictions of violence](#) against the female characters or its aftermath. Fem 2.0 published [a thoughtful piece](#) explaining how in the world depicted in MacFarlane’s song, women’s nudity always equals a win for men but a loss for women.

The Oscars are supposed to be a classy affair, at least compared to the Golden Globes, but who ever said class is automatically free from sexism and racism? MacFarlane got in digs at Salma Hayek, Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem for supposedly being difficult to understand due to their accents, but forgivable due to the good looks. He made joking references to the personal violence singer Rihanna has experienced, women starving themselves to look good at the ceremony, and so on.

MacFarlane even incorporated nine-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis, who was nominated for a Best Actress award for her role in “Beasts of the Southern Wild,” into his dig at George Clooney’s dating habits, saying: “To give you an idea how young she is, it’ll be 16 years before she’s too old for Clooney.”

This brings us to the most reprehensible statement of the night, for which MacFarlane was not responsible. That honor belongs to the comedy outlet The Onion, which posted on Twitter: “Everyone else seems afraid to say it, but that Quvenzhané Wallis is kind of a c**t, right? #Oscars2013”

Here we have an African-American girl who gave such an amazing performance that she became the youngest actor ever nominated in her category. She was not only an Academy Award nominee, but also the winner of far too many awards for me to list all of them here — including the African-American Film Critics Association for Best Breakthrough Performance; the Alliance of Women Film Journalists Award for Best Breakthrough Performance; the Hollywood Film Festival New Hollywood Award; and the National Board of Review Award for Breakthrough Actress.

This was a special night for Wallis, as it was for her family and for every girl and woman who was proud of her and saw her as a sign of progress in Hollywood. But some writer thought nothing of making a disgusting joke at her expense, and in a flash The Onion made that night very different for Wallis.

Yes, [The Onion apologized](#), and not in one of those half-assed “I’m sorry if you were offended” ways that Congressmen are known for. But why did they have to apologize in the first place? Because our culture still thinks it’s funny to call women (and even little girls) names based on their anatomy, based on their presumed sexual activity, based on stereotypes that tell us all women are repugnant witches, untouchable Madonnas or naughty temptresses. Because, as Shelby Knox tweeted, our culture “breeds ‘jokes’ that degrade young women of color using gendered, sexualized slurs.” In a culture where girls

and women are caricatures and not full people, it is that much easier to dehumanize, humiliate and victimize us.

I know it might sound petty to some people to get all fired up about a few jokes. But it's not funny. These jokes are part of the centuries old narrative about women. Women of color have the narrative of race layered on top of misogyny, making The Onion's nasty attack on a bright, talented nine-year-old child especially disgusting.

We must do all we can to change this ugly aspect of our culture. We could start with an apology from Seth MacFarlane and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for the sexism and racism on display at the Oscars. Even better, let's take a look at the leadership inside the Academy and The Onion, and demand fair representation of women and people of color in their boardrooms and their executive suites. Women deserve at least that, right?